

**Notes on the Tijâniyya Hamawiyya
in Nioro du Sahel
after the second exile of its shaykh***

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In this essay, I explore the Tijâniyya Hamawiyya in Nioro du Sahel, particularly after the second exile of Shaykh Hamahu'llah¹. The main goal is to show how the Sufi affiliation that developed around Shaykh Hamahu'llah remained resilient even in the face of incredible opposition and systematic repression during the colonial period and some of the ways in which it has been reconstituted in the postcolonial period.

Early in this century, Shaykh Hamahu'llah, a *sharif* (descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) from Nioro du Sahel (Soudan français, present-day Mali), arose as a Tijânî leader, eventually attracting followers from a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups throughout the French colonies in West Africa – often at the expense of the existing Tijâniyya whose recognized leaders had established a working relationship with the French by the first decades of this century. Many of Hamahu'llah's followers proclaimed him to be the highest ranking saint of his time, *qutb al-zaman*². After Hamahu'llah encountered

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1. The Sufi order has been called « Hamallism » and sometimes the Hamalliya in the colonial and scholarly literatures. The contemporary leadership of the Sufi order in Nioro du Sahel uses the term, the Tijâniyya Hamawiyya or simply the Hamawiyya. Although those affiliated with this Sufi order are often called « Hamallistes » in French, I will refer to them as Hamawis, as many of them prefer to be called.
2. See, for example, Sayyid Muhammad ibn Mu'adh, *al-Yaqut wa al-marjan fi hayat*

opposition from some of the established Tijâniyya, the Sufi order he led came to be known as the Tijâniyya Hamawiyya or simply the Hamawiyya³.

After conflicts in the 1920s between some of Hamahu'llah's followers and detractors, the French colonial administration exiled Hamahu'llah from Nioro for a period of ten years, which he spent in Saint-Louis, Senegal, then in Mederdra, Mauritania, and, finally, in Côte d'Ivoire. In 1936, he was allowed to return to Nioro, but not, as it turned out, for very long. After violent clashes on the Saharan fringes between two of Hamahu'llah's sons and their enemies, the colonial administration – under the Vichy regime – forced Hamahu'llah into his second exile in 1941 on a day remembered as Black Thursday. He was taken by plane from Nioro to Dakar, then to Algeria, before being transferred to France. Early in 1943 Hamahu'llah died, though the news of his death was not made public in West Africa until after the war.

In the time leading up to and after the arrest of Hamahu'llah, there was systematic repression of both those suspected of involvement in the armed clashes and his followers. This began with the trial and subsequent execution of more than two dozen men, including two of his sons, for involvement in the clashes of 1940⁴. After this time, the French designated « Hamallism » as one of the principal dangers to colonial order and took steps to crush it⁵. Many of Hamahu'llah's closest followers, including some prominent deputies (*muqaddam*-s), were among those sent to concentration camps in Ansongo, among other places, in the eastern part of the Soudan, an area believed to be outside Hamahu'llah's sphere of influence. Working as forced laborers, a considerable number of these men died in detention⁶. Those followers of Hamahu'llah in Nioro who hailed from places outside the town were forced to return to their home areas in other parts of AOF⁷. All of these measures struck a considerable blow to the Sufi order, even though they did not succeed in eliminating it, as the colonial administration may have intended. After Hamahu'llah's exile and the detention of so many of his followers, the French continued to monitor very closely the activities of all known or

suspected followers and associates of Hamahu'llah. While those said to be disrupting public order were summarily arrested, many others not directly punished were threatened with sanctions⁸. In 1942, the colonial administration took its campaign against the Hamawiyya to a new level when a decision was made to raze the buildings belonging to Hamahu'llah, including the Sufi center (*zawiya*) where he had led prayers⁹. In 1944, with « the main goal of permitting more efficient surveillance of Hamallism¹⁰ », the colonial administration implemented territorial reforms, redrawing the boundary between Mauritania and Soudan so as to keep « nomadic » Bidan (« Moor ») followers of Hamahu'llah isolated from « sedentary » Africans (« Soudanais¹¹ »).

Throughout this time, followers of Hamahu'llah who remained in Nioro were considerably constrained in their activities and felt they were under constant threat of repression. They were not allowed to gather together for communal prayer and recitation of the special litanies of the Sufi order. Most of them refused, however, to pray at the main Friday mosque in the town, as it was controlled by the local Muslim establishment, some of whose most prominent members had been hostile to Hamahu'llah. Faced with the threat of persecution, many prayed alone in their homes, afraid even to carry their prayer beads or mention the name of their shaykh in public.

The repression was accompanied by an incredible sense of longing on the part of people for their shaykh. This was expressed in part through the rumors that abounded about Hamahu'llah's whereabouts, anticipated return, and the departure of the French. Privately and less frequently publicly, some cursed the enemies of Hamahu'llah. According to some Hamawis in present-day Nioro, many became convinced that his absence from Nioro was part of his divinely-inspired mission¹².

During the war, the French colonial administration had orchestrated the public renunciation of Hamahu'llah by some prominent Muslims in the Soudan. As early as 1942, leading scholars from places such as Oualata renounced the Hamawiyya¹³. Many others abandoned the Hamawiyya in

shaykhuna himayat al-rahman, Casablanca, 1988; Cheikh Tahirou Doucouré, *al-Da'wa al-hamawiyya fi mirat al-tariqa al-ahmadiyya al-tijâniyya*, Dakar, 1976; and Benjamin Soares and John O. Hunwick, « The Shaykh as the Locus of Divine Self-Disclosure: A Poem in Praise of Shaykh Hamahu'llah », *Sudanic Africa*, 7 (1996).

3. Cf. Alioune Traoré, *Islam et colonisation en Afrique*, Cheick Hamahoullah, homme de foi et résistant, Paris, 1983.

4. On this subject, see Traoré, *Islam et colonisation*, and Amadou Ba, *Histoire du Sahel occidental malien*, Bamako, 1989. For a list of those executed, see Ibn Mu'adh, *al-Yaqt*. Archives, Nioro du Sahel, Mali, Circulaire no. 1.100, Koulouba, 28 Dec. 1942. This document refers to Hamallism as « the principal danger ».

6. For a partial list of detainees from Nioro who died in exile, see Ba, *Histoire*, pp. 233f.

7. Centre des archives d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (CAOM), 14 Mi 1835. Archives nationales du Sénégal, Dakar (ANS), 2G 42-3, Soudan, Rapport politique, 1942. A few of these people were able to remain in Nioro.

8. See, for example, Archives nationales du Mali, Koulouba (ANM), 1E 36 (FR), Rapport tournée, Castex, Nioro, 21 June 1942; CAOM, 14 Mi 1835, 2G 42-3, Soudan, Rapport politique, 1942; ANM, 2M 237 (FR), Nioro (1937-1945).

9. ANS, 15G 43 (17), T.L. Gov. Soudan to Haussaire, Dakar, 10 Jan. 1942.

10. Archives, Nioro du Sahel, Letter (confidential), Gov. Gen. AOF to Gov. Soudan, 28 May 1946.

11. CAOM, Aff Pol 2173/7, Confins soudano-mauritaniens, 1944.

12. This is also reported from archival sources. See Vincent Joly, « L'Administration du Soudan français et les événements de "Nioro-Assaba" (août 1940) », in E. Bernus et al. (éds), *Nomades et commandants : Administration et sociétés nomades dans l'ancienne AOF*, Paris, 1993.

13. See ANM 4E 26-6 (FR), Notice sur trois notables du c. de Néma..., n.d.

order to have peace¹⁴. Be that as it may, throughout all of the repression and even after such renunciations many remained steadfast in their devotion to Hamahu'llah. While some were defiant of the French, saying they would never renounce their shaykh, others worked more quietly in his name. For example, certain people continued to serve and to provide for Hamahu'llah's wives and children, as to do so was considered pious activity.

After the war, the French never conceded that Hamahu'llah and his followers had been mistreated and refused to consider them among the « victims of Vichy »¹⁵. Nevertheless, the French Fourth Republic initiated a series of reforms, eventually allowing for the formation of political parties. These reforms marked the beginning of a period of considerably less repression and persecution for Hamahu'llah's followers. In 1946, the French released the surviving detainees from the labor camps before their sentences ended. Upon return to Nioro, the detainees were explicitly warned that they would be rearrested if public order was disturbed¹⁶. Shortly before this time, Hamahu'llah's death had been formally announced in the colonies¹⁷. Many were incredulous, and some refused to accept the news as true. Some did accept it as true and, as early as 1949, recommended that a mausoleum for Hamahu'llah be built in Nioro¹⁸.

Because the Hamawiyya no longer had a Sufi center, some began to gather in small groups, most notably at the home of one of the former detainees, where they prayed together¹⁹. In this era of greater liberality, the colonial administration permitted their assembly. With the memory of repression still so fresh, many stayed away, continuing to pray privately, while some returned to pray at the Friday mosque in Nioro. After all of the repression, the colonial administration noted that Hamawis had become among the most tractable in Nioro; they remained, however, under close surveillance²⁰. Even into the 1950s, the colonial administration assumed that the Hamawiyya was latently anti-colonial and perhaps even in direct contact

with the Arab League²¹. Such colonial fears were certainly exacerbated by the localized armed clashes in 1949 in eastern Soudan between the French and Sharif Musa, one of Hamahu'llah's *muqaddam*-s from near Gao²². Considerable administrative attention was also focused on the possible links and ties – collusion in the language of administrative reports – between followers of Hamahu'llah and the anti-colonial political party, Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA).

Even though Hamahu'llah was never to return to Nioro, his influence and that of his family remained strong. For instance, before elections in Nioro, politicians from RDA went and sought blessings from one of Hamahu'llah's wives who was living in the town. Her ready willingness to accord these blessings was common knowledge in Nioro²³. In the absence of a designated successor to Hamahu'llah, many people looked to his surviving children for leadership. But the male children all lived most of the time in Mauritania where they were very closely monitored. Sharif Ahmad (1915-1972) was the oldest living son and assumed the role of head of the family. Many turned to him as the leader of the Hamawiyya. Until the late 1950s, he lived near Oualata and visited Nioro from time to time. By all accounts, he kept a very low profile. In contrast, his siblings were sometimes a source of anxiety for colonial administrators because of their frequently open activities on behalf of the Hamawiyya. One of his sisters was put in forced residence for her allegedly subversive activities on behalf of the Hamawiyya²⁴. Likewise, in the 1950s his younger brothers were said to cause quite a stir, especially among followers of Hamahu'llah, as they traveled around southeastern Mauritania²⁵.

In 1957, Sharif Ahmad broke his relative silence and formally requested authorization from the colonial administration to move to Nioro where he would reclaim his father's land²⁶. The authorization to return was granted²⁷.

14. According to a *muqaddam* quoted in « Note sur le hamallisme », typescript, Dakar, 1948, p. 46.
15. See ANM, 4E 1256 (ii), Note, Capitaine Cardaire, n.d.
16. ANS, 15G 47 (17), Soudan, Rapport politique, Aug. 1946.
17. For the instructions to announce Hamahu'llah's death, see ANM, 4E 1256 (ii), Circulaire, Gov. Gen. AOF to Gov., 7 June 1945. The announcement may have been delayed because of the sense that French « prestige » had suffered so much since 1940. See ANM, 4E 21 (FR), Circulaire (Secret), Gov. Gen. AOF to Gov. Colonies, 18 Dec 1944.
18. ANM, 4E 1256 (ii), Admin Nioro to Gov Soudan, 24 Feb 1953
19. Informants report that they gathered at the home of Dembu Nimaga in the Diakha neighborhood of Nioro, while later others gathered at the home of Ahmad Wuld Sidi 'Uthman (d. 1956) near where Hamahu'llah had lived. See also CAOM, Aff Pol 2258/3, Rapport de Mission sur la situation de l'islam en AOF (3 April-31 July 1952), J. Beyriès.
20. ANM, 1E 36-24 (FR), Bull. de Renseignements, Nioro, 1st trim., 1949.

21. See CAOM, Aff Pol 2258/3, Ministère de la France d'outre-mer, Dir. des Affaires politiques, Note pour M. le Ministre, with the date given as 195-. A handwritten note on this text mentions the alleged relations with the Arab League.
22. On this subject, see R.L. Moreau, « Les marabouts de Dori », *Archives de sociologie des religions*, 7 (1964); and Hamidou Diallo, « Moussa Aminou, le « mahdi » de Ouani », in D. Robinson and J.-L. Triaud (eds), *Le temps des marabouts*, Paris, 1997.
23. This is widely reported by people in Nioro, whether Hamawis or not. Although clearly many Hamawis supported RDA, this closeness between some Hamawis and RDA does not mean that the Hamawiyya was no longer a force. Cf. Pierre Alexandre, « A West African Islamic Movement: Hamallism in French West Africa », in R.I. Rotberg and A.A. Mazrui (eds), *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, London, 1970.
24. ANS, 15G 43 (17), Soudan, Rapport situation politique, Nov -Dec., 1943, July-Aug., 1944.
25. Archives, Nioro du Sahel, Admin. Nioro to Chef Terr. Soudan, 18 Aug. 1958.
26. ANM, 1E 68-6 (FR), Revue mensuelle des événements, Nioro, Dec. 1957.
27. He also requested the return of his father's library that had been seized by the French. Eventually part of this library as well as his father's correspondence were returned.

On the eve of decolonization at the end of 1958, Sharif Ahmad supervised the reconstruction of the *zawiya* in the place where it had stood. People came from all over to rebuild the *zawiya*, while others sent cash and money orders to finance the reconstruction. For many followers of Hamahu'llah, this was the first real break after years of repression since they were finally going to be allowed to pray together at the rebuilt *zawiya*. After this time, some came to Nioro to be close to Hamahu'llah's family and/or to serve at the *zawiya*, sometimes for short periods and, on occasion, to settle permanently in the town.

Sharif Ahmad, however, was not well enough to be actively involved in the running of the *zawiya*. Due to a long illness, he lived on the outskirts of Nioro and traveled infrequently into the town. After the *zawiya* was rebuilt, Sharif Ahmad authorized his younger brother, Muhammadu (also known as Buya) (b. 1937), to serve as head of the *zawiya* and to lead prayer as his father before him. In addition, following his brother's instructions, Muhammadu opened the inner part of the rebuilt *zawiya*, the place where he would perform prayers. Such an action seemed to signal a return to a state of affairs prior to the repression since Hamahu'llah had kept this part of the *zawiya* closed from the time of his first exile in 1925²⁸. In his role as the oldest active son of Hamahu'llah, Muhammadu was to become *de facto* leader of the Hamawiyya in Nioro.

By the time of independence, even though the *zawiya* had been rebuilt in Nioro, the Hamawiyya was in a state of considerable disarray with its widely recognized leader not well. On the other hand, its *de facto* leader, who was only in his twenties was enormously popular. Many from the region, drawn by the charisma of Muhammadu, started to renew their ties with the Hamawiyya. In the years before his older brother's death in 1972, Muhammadu also undertook a series of trips, traveling widely to those areas of West Africa where there were many associated with the Hamawiyya. He visited various communities and *muqaddam*-s in Senegal, Haute-Volta (present day Burkina Faso), and Côte d'Ivoire, among other places, and sometimes married women from these places, making important alliances. The major consequence of these trips (and marriage alliances) was the partial reconsolidation of the Hamawiyya under the young Muhammadu's authority.

Muhammadu expected Hamahu'llah's followers to be deferential to him, his family, and those who had been particularly close to Hamahu'llah. Thus, he seems to have taken measures to assert his authority and the authority of his family over other potential contenders for power within the Hamawiyya.

28. That Hamallah kept part of the *zawiya* closed after his return from exile in 1936 is noted in Nioro today. It was also known to the colonial administration. See ANM, 4E 26-4 (FR), Gov. Soudan to Comm. Nioro, Gao, etc., 24 Sept. 1937.

For example, there is the case of Yacouba Sylla (1906-1988), one of Hamahu'llah's most well-known followers who hailed from Nioro²⁹. After the colonial administration implicated Yacouba Sylla in clashes in 1930 in Kaédi (Mauritania), he was exiled to Côte d'Ivoire where he settled in 1938 after his liberation. In the following year, Yacouba Sylla made what must have been at the time a sumptuous gift – a new Ford Mercury – to Hamahu'llah in Nioro³⁰. While many of Yacouba's followers recognized him as a saint, he was known until his death to have been deeply committed to Shaykh Hamahu'llah. His personal stationery proclaimed himself to be the follower of Hamahu'llah, and Hamahu'llah's name was painted on all of his transport vehicles. In the postcolonial period, Yacouba Sylla was a very wealthy and influential person surrounded by many people who were involved in his extensive commercial and agricultural schemes in Côte d'Ivoire. After an occasion when Yacouba failed to treat Muhammadu with the great respect that he felt he deserved as Hamahu'llah's son, there were tensions between Muhammadu's and Yacouba's associates, though not a schism³¹. Similarly, the leadership in Nioro has refused to associate with any followers of Hamahu'llah who have made public pronouncements on his death. This has not only served to exclude such persons from the Hamawiyya, as it is recognized in Nioro, but also as a warning to others about the limits of what is deemed acceptable.

Since Sharif Ahmad's death in 1972, Muhammadu has been not only the head of Hamahu'llah's family but also the widely recognized leader of the Hamawiyya. There continues to be, however, some ambiguity about his actual title. Some consider him a khalifa, but this is not a title that he claims for himself. He maintains that he is, above all, a follower or disciple of his father³². In managing the affairs of the Hamawiyya, Muhammadu was closely advised by his older sister, Zaynab (also known as Nuha) (1920-1994) who lived in neighboring Aïoun in Mauritania. For about 20 years, most followers of Hamahu'llah – at least in Nioro – have recognized Muhammadu as the leader chosen by his father to lead his father's followers. In the mid-1970s, a Mauritanian, who had left the area on *hijra* during the colonial period and had

29. For an extended discussion of Yacouba Sylla, see Traoré, *Islam et Colonisation*, and Boukary Savadogo, *Confréries et Pouvoirs La Tijâniyya Hamawiyya en Afrique occidentale (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger) 1909-1965*. Thèse de doctorat, Univ. de Provence (Aix-Marseille I), 2 volumes, 1998, and, by the same author, the contribution to the present volume.

30. Archives, Nioro du Sahel, Letter, Yacouba Sylla to Hamahu'llah, 8 June 1939.

31. In contrast, Muhammadu's younger brother, Abu Bakr (also known as Ibby) (d. 1992), who lived in neighboring Aïoun (Mauritania), maintained close ties with Yacouba Sylla and his family.

32. See « Interview de Cheikh Mohamedou Ould Cheikh Hamahoullah », *Mauritanie Nouvelles*, 2-9 May 1994.

been living in Medina in Saudi Arabia, sent a series of letters to West Africa. He explained in his letters that he had seen Shaykh Hamahu'llah in a vision – not in a dream³³ – who told him to inform people that he, Shaykh Hamahu'llah, had made his son Muhammadu the *amir* (Ar., leader) of his community³⁴. After the Mauritanian sent the letter to several prominent followers of Hamahu'llah, including Muhammadu, the contents were made public and circulated. It was then announced that followers of Hamahu'llah should come to Nioro and renew their affiliation with Muhammadu³⁵. Many traveled to Nioro to do just this. This was also an occasion for Muhammadu to make efforts to expel from the Hamawiyya those whose practices many considered illicit. Thus, those followers of Hamahu'llah known for their failure to pray the obligatory ritual daily prayers were not allowed to participate; upon their arrival in Nioro from Mauritania they were asked to leave the town³⁶. The ultimate effect of this was further consolidation of the Hamawiyya under Muhammadu's leadership.

Since the time of the exile of its shaykh, the Hamawiyya has changed considerably. While during the colonial period, many, if not most, of Hamahu'llah's followers and *muqaddam*-s came from Bidan groups in the Sahel, this is no longer the case today. In Mauritania, the Hamawiyya is only one Sufi order, among others³⁷. Nonetheless, Muhammadu is an important and influential figure in Mauritania. For instance, in the 1990s he instructed his followers in the Aïoun region how to cast their votes in elections³⁸.

In the present, the Hamawiyya is perhaps strongest in western Mali as well as in such longstanding centers of Hamahu'llah's influence as Banamba and parts of eastern Mauritania. But Muhammadu's reputation as a religious figure extends much further. Indeed, he had close ties with Malian president Moussa Traoré whose regime was overthrown in 1991³⁹. And the Sufi order has spread along with migrants, particularly from Mali. In the present, large concentrations of followers of Hamahu'llah and their *zawiya*-s can be found in Côte d'Ivoire and Central Africa, places where Malian migrants have gone in great numbers. At the same time, there is frequent contact and ongoing

relations with other Hamawi communities established by followers of Hamahu'llah⁴⁰, most notably those in Burkina Faso and in Senegal.

Even though the Hamawiyya faced serious leadership and organizational difficulties after the exile of its shaykh, Muhammadu worked hard to rebuild and reconsolidate the Hamawiyya under his authority. In Nioro, he lives surrounded by his many followers and is said to lead an even greater number of people. As one of the principal importers of goods from Mauritania into Mali through Nioro, he has also become a very prosperous merchant. Each year, one week after the *mawlid al-nabi* (the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth), he hosts a *ziyara* (Ar., visit) in Nioro at the *zawiya*⁴¹. This is the largest annual gathering in Nioro by Hamawis and others seeking the blessings of Hamahu'llah and his descendants. It is a time when literally thousands come to Nioro from the immediate area, neighboring regions, and much further afield for the celebration and for the affirmation (or, as the case may be, initiation) of their ties to Hamahu'llah and his family. By the late twentieth century, all of these have combined to make Muhammadu a major power broker, whose influence extends to nearly all areas of life in the region, a fact that has not gone unappreciated on both sides of the border separating Mali and Mauritania.

33 This is perhaps an allusion to various Hadith about *ru'ya* [visions] and *hulm* [dreams]

34 The author of the letters, Dayf Wuld al-Bah of the Ahl Sidi Mahmud, has since died

35 This is referred to in Nioro as « the time of *bay'a* » (Ar., submission)

36 For a discussion of some of their likely forerunners, the « Ahel Houvra », see Traore, *Islam et Colonisation*, pp 191ff

37 See Diana Stone, « Aspects du paysage religieux marabouts et confreries », *Politique africaine*, 55 (1994)

38 Some of these issues are discussed in « Interview de Cheikh Mohamedou Ould Cheikh Hamahoullah »

39 On the ties with Traoré, see Tidiane Diallo, « Pouvoir et marabouts en Afrique de l'Ouest », *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara*, 2 (1988)

40 Cf Savadogo, *Confreries et Pouvoirs*

41 The time is locally known as *ism al-nabi* (Ar., literally, the name of the Prophet)